

Roberto Calasso

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Roberto Calasso is a figure of great interest to me, in great part due to his original *modus operandi*: he explores history and culture and then analyses it from the ground up, searching for the possible hidden meaning behind ideas and narratives. And everything is valid, everything is important, everything can be connected. As long as your intellect allows you to do so. His books are however quite difficult to follow; it takes some time to get used to his style and his thought process. Honestly, most of the sentences in his books remain a mystery to me, since I don't know what it is that Calasso was trying to say exactly. The meaning of his words is itself a new riddle, based on older riddles. But I think that is, in a way, the whole point of his endeavour: the "meaning" of an idea is often impossible to establish and that is particularly obvious when it comes to one of Calasso's main interests, mythology, a realm where everything is inevitably shrouded in mystery. The origin, development and meaning of myths is essentially beyond understanding. Yet their importance and influence are enormous and constant. Myths are relevant. And they are constantly developing around us; we partake in mythology all the time, albeit without our explicit intention. And that is, I believe, the reason why Calasso's books are themselves difficult to understand, because they are yet another mystery. To me, they are often more poetic than they are clear or understandable. And therefore, Calasso becomes himself another kind of bard, albeit a modern one. This is basically my reading of him and his works. They are another unsolvable puzzle, aware of its own difficulty and therefore also highly intelligent. Aware of their position as another piece of history.

Every book by Calasso that I've read is fascinating and thought-provoking like only a handful of books I've ever read. They are meant to be digested once and again, periodically. There will always be something new to think about in those pages. And Calasso himself becomes part of the mythology he tries to unravel: he is history in the making by trying to understand history.

Ideas gathered from *The Book of all Books*:

- The role of the Bible as a story, filled with allegory. Which in fact can't help but be allegory. This takes us to an interesting question: what is a story? It's creating a narrative, a prism through which the randomness history can seem purposeful and logical. The Bible tries to find coherence and structure in order to aid with the passing of time and with the succession of otherwise seemingly random events. Yahweh is an allegorist.
- A recurring theme while reading the books is the question of Jewish identity. I think it's important to mention this from the start.
- Throughout the Bible we hear of Yahweh, the God who guides the children of Israel. Yet it comes across as a particularly cruel and spiteful God. Who is Yahweh? How come a God is so eager to be adored, to the point where it would torment its devotees? Once one is familiar with the Bible, Yahweh ends up becoming terrifying and oddly human through selfish and narcissistic vulgarity.
- Saul is mentioned as the essentially legendary first monarch of Israel, its first king. A Jewish king is a huge novelty in history, given that it signals a new moral and political lifestyle for Israel: no longer will priestly classes be at the top of society and daily life. In fact, it is mentioned that the people wanted a king because they wanted to be like other nations and that Yahweh was severely opposed to this idea. Therefore, the people opposed their own God and actually challenged his plans and his divine Law. And they succeeded. Because they wanted to be like nations around them. That is such a strange idea. It is only one example of the violent and radical clashes that constantly take place between Yahweh and his devotees.
- Important and complicated conflicts happen in the Bible before the narrative simply moves on before solving them.

- A king is by definition a violent imposition on its people. But Yahweh was also a violent imposition on its people. So maybe the substitution entailed a surprisingly similar result.
- One of the things Yahweh desired above all else was to single out the children of Israel. Jewish identity is directly linked to being an outsider; to being special and different.
- The children of Israel are God's favorite. Yahweh loves them more than anyone else on earth. Therefore, they must suffer. And change. Jewish identity is radically connected to the act of transformation. What it means to be Jewish changes all the time, and it's been one of the longest stories of historical transformation, which still survives to this day and is still subjected to big changes. It seems fitting, given that identity itself also changes all the time; because it is by nature unstable.
- Jewish history has to do with victimhood, as can be already seen in the Bible. Yet the Bible also narrates how the Jewish people perpetrated many bloody killings through its history, against its neighbors. People they quite explicitly wanted to exterminate.
- The Bible focuses on those that have been chosen. The concept of election, of those elected by divine power, runs through the Bible. These 'elected' individuals move the story along. Which is another way of saying that they move History along. Certain chosen individuals are way more important than others, which is a heavy and uncomfortable burden on them.
- When an Angel cleaned a bloody sword on King David's robe, the latter shivered so profoundly that the shock never left him until his death much later. Yahweh and his supernatural world are terrifying. It is this kind of scene and action often found in the Bible that I find to be so poetic and moving.
- Conducting a census was a religious crime. Counting the people in a territory amounts to something like a sin. Why? Because it is an attempt to know the unknowable, an attempt to attain a complete control you aren't meant to have. That is my understanding of Calasso's analysis of the census in biblical literature. Quite a novel idea for me.
- King David is mentioned as the first individual to whom Yahweh communicates a long-term plan for the future: for the first time there is an attempt to predict the future and outsmart it. It happens only once a stable political system has been established in Israel.

It's as if Yahweh himself was waiting for his devotees to be stable before relying the huge building they'd have to construct. In other words, once this tribe of people had gained stability, their mythology changed from the story of a nomadic group to that of a settled monarchy. A new society that plans ahead.

- Jerusalem wasn't the birthplace of Judaism, nor was it a city the Jews founded. Nor did they arrive in Jerusalem early in their history. In fact, Jerusalem was taken by the children of Israel. There were a people there already, the Jebusites. Therefore, there was a clash of cultures from the onset, a mixture that was unavoidable but that was also palpable and easy to remember. Even in the Bible, Jerusalem is already a place where distinct identities enter into conflict. In the capital and spiritual center of the Jews there was room for gentiles, for a continuous sense of differentiation.
- *"King David was old, advanced in years. They covered him with clothes, but he could not get warm"*. That is the very first sentence that opens the book of Kings. It's terribly poignant and I find it profoundly beautiful. Interestingly enough, it doesn't have to do with Yahweh or with religion as such. It's the description of an old man who has had a long and difficult life, filled with mistakes and filled with moments of vulgar selfishness. It's the description of something that broke and won't ever be fixed again.
- Yahweh always knows what every mind is thinking, it is explicitly stated. Yet this divine and all-powerful God is constantly challenged by its most fervent devotees, and it desperately searches for a jealous recognition that will annul any form worship to any other god. Again, to me Yahweh seems like a painfully 'human' figure, characterized by some of the ugliest of human traits.
- King Solomon was the successor of King David, who was the first monarch of Israel. He is described as an observer, a patient and intelligent man who studies the world around him. For the first time, we find a figure that resembles that of an intellectual or a philosopher: once society and politics have achieved a certain stability, then an individual can look and analyze. He asked Yahweh for a "heart that understands", resulting in the first time the Bible underlines the importance of pure understanding. It reminds me of Ulysses, whose journey focused on intellect and adaptation instead of violent strength and fierce courage.

- Calasso mentions that King Solomon was given understanding “in surplus”, because true understanding would be incomplete otherwise. I don’t understand what he means by that, but I’d imagine it has to do with the limits of intellect: genuine understanding has to do with realizing you are not able to understand completely. I’m not at all sure about this though.
- King David brought the concept of the aesthetic to the culture of Israel. I guess this has to do with my perception that settled people are more likely to focus on that which is beautiful for its own sake. It is important to remember that King David is a name mentioned when the narrative is already quite advanced and the story of the Jews had been developing for centuries.
- Yahweh instructs Solomon to build a place of worship for him, a house for God on earth. History, Calasso states, is the relationship between God and humanity, as expressed through that house. Historical narratives move along because humanity aims to communicate with God, through prayer. The mere act of prayer is already a powerful form of communication, precisely because there is no clear reply. A question that has no answer is already quite a complete act. That is how I understand this idea.
- That the world should take your breath away is an essential part of the human experience. That is an idea Calasso mentions directly.
- The Bible is an absolute and unique entity, different and isolated from everything around it. It speaks in riddles and never bothers to explain anything it states. The Bible is genuinely impossible to understand. Like all mythology and like all religion, one can only approach it, and after a period of vain struggle let things run their course. It is a book of mystery, which also explains one of the main ideas I understood from the Zohar: the world persists through mystery. The chaotic mess that is the Bible is also its biggest strength: it’s not meant to be taken literally because it can’t, but that is far from a fault. I am reminded of the story of Krishna as a young boy, who opened his mouth and allowed his mother to see that the whole universe was hiding inside it. The emotion of the scene is enough to justify its existence: coherence and logic have little to do with its relevance.

- The Song of Songs is a surprisingly erotic piece of literature, which is remarkable given that it is part of the Bible. It is highly sensual and suggestive, and the passing familiarity I have with it reminds me somewhat of Sufi poetry: God as the beloved, humanity as a lover.
- Goethe called the Bible “the book of all books”. He said it is like another world where sensitive minds can go and drown in its endless depth of poetry and meaning. A condition that I think necessary for truly great creative works is that they should be like a deep pool you can swim in from time to time. But, try as you might, you will never reach its bottom.
- Both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes were allegedly written by King Solomon, according to the Bible. They are very different pieces of literature, concerned with that which is earthly and mundane; pleasure and impermanence. They are painfully human. And they are said to come from the first child of Israel who was able to look at the world and study it with ‘scientific’ intent. Searching beyond Yahweh he found pleasure and impermanence. They are fascinating chapters in the Bible because they aren’t too concerned with the narrative presented thus far. In a sense one could say they are particularly timeless because they move beyond the need of a story since they talk about some of the rawest aspects of humanity.
- *“Nothing to add/Nothing to take away”*. Ecclesiastes comes quite close to eastern philosophy. No goals are truly important. Nothing can truly change. Sacrifice doesn’t really matter. There’s no such thing as a victory. Solomon is repeatedly described as one of the biblical epitomes of wisdom. And his conclusion befriends nothingness.
- Proverbs is also attributed to Solomon. It is a text concerned with axiomatic rules and how things should be. It is certainly interesting that three drastically different texts should have been written by a single person. Solomon explores sensual pleasure, impermanence and morality, contradicting himself immensely in the process. It’s as if The Bible was telling us that this exemplary man of wisdom had lived more than a single life, that he had had more than a single mind.
- To include such contradictions in a single work just makes me appreciate the work more. It reminds me of the Mahabharata, a book where everything has to be approached and

explored. Because everything matters, everything is important. Everything is Dharma. Contradiction is no mistake.

- To achieve Wisdom, one needs a previous knowledge of Wisdom, which is a poetic way of saying that not everything is available to everyone. Some are 'chosen' to explore what they already possess. And eventually Wisdom leads to prayer. It is important to note the characterization of Wisdom as some sort of a divine being.
- Solomon experiences a falling out with Yahweh while king, because the monarch established diverse relationships with foreign women outside the Israelite religion. And those women brought their beliefs into the kingdom, which surprisingly weren't banned or forbidden according to the jealousy of Yahweh. So, Solomon becomes a somewhat modern figure, accepting of diverse customs and cultures and open to new ideas; his wisdom goes hand in hand with this tolerance, as it does with his patience and his study of the world. Solomon accepts that the divine is manifold. And Yahweh condemns this act of acceptance.
- The figure of the prophet was very common in biblical times. It might seem like a ridiculous figure nowadays, but the role is quite logical: someone to explain what has and hasn't happened; someone to give structure to time. He who communicates through feeling, a feeling which gives *direction*.
- Yahweh aims to monopolize divinity. It's a delicate and complex idea, deep and ambiguous. It's quite a novelty in history. It's delicate to say so, given the complexity of the concept, but if the story of Europe is closely connected to the Bible, then the relevance of the idea of a single, monopolizing power might be related to the jealousy of Yahweh. This is of course, a bit absurd.
- Prophets and monarchs were continuously at odds with each other. They are essentially opposites. Yahweh never wanted a king, nor did the prophets. This dramatic change in society and politics just entailed a large conflict that never quite ended. There is an interesting division between politics and religion in the story and culture of the Bible. Calasso compares it to Vedic India, where both holy men and kings are essential to a larger order. It's as if in the Bible there was some sort of "fragmentation of a whole".

- *"What I did I did out of my belief that it was my duty to do"*. A cliché of a sentence, found throughout history because it is a logical reaction to the world. Calasso remarks that both holy and foul mouths pronounce the sentence throughout time.
- One of the distinctive trademarks of Judaism and Christianity is its reliance on a book. Mythology and religion weren't an oral product anymore, nor was tradition subjected symbolically to the act of repeating a sacrifice. It was in the form of something physical and undeniable. And what's more, it had to be *read*. This fact set the children of Israel apart from most of their contemporaries. Theology had to be accessed through reading, which was a condition immensely different and not found in many antique religions.
- The structure of Calasso's book seemed a bit confusing to me at first because it suddenly jumps in time. After delving into the early kings of Israel we suddenly jump back to Abraham, back to the beginning of the patriarchs and the bloodline. Yet this is a logical decision, given that we are starting with figures that are barely semi-historical but who are nevertheless much more grounded in the realm of fact and plausibility. What's more, the narrative of the beginning of the religion and its mythological forefathers probably came after centuries of Jewish history. It is virtually impossible to know whether the stories of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob actually happened. Whether those chosen individuals actually existed; and the misery persists even if we were to subtract the supernatural element from those stories. What we witness is the creation of a narrative, which is essential for the creation of an identity. The question of its plausibility is far from the most important aspect of the matter.
- From the start the story of Abraham, the father of Judaism, is a story of migration, separation and journey. Drastic displacement has always characterized the Jews. I find it particularly interesting that Abraham was actually from Ur, a city in Mesopotamia. The patriarch of Canaan actually came from a distant city.
- The story of the Bible is a succession of degenerations that last generations before a chosen individual arrives to better a truly a chaotic situation. Aided by Yahweh of course. Similar in a way to how Vishnu has to reincarnate from time to time to establish order in a world where evil has become far too powerful. Or similar to how Shia Islam is awaiting

the arrival of Imam Mahdi. The figure of the Messiah is by far the most famous example of this mechanism.

- The Tower of Babel was meant to be the symbol of humanity's unity. But Yahweh decided it would be better for humanity if communication wasn't so easy to achieve. Therefore, he made sure that the efforts to build this tower were in vain. Separating humanity was one of Yahweh's aims. Once again, we find an emphasis on the divine effort of making things separate and distinctly diverse.
- Abraham was ordered to go away from his land and forge a new identity in a new country. That was a special command, not very common amongst holy orders: abandon your forefathers, their customs and their traditions. Abraham was then led into a journey of pain, without knowing the reason or the result. Or what was to come exactly. Any later Biblical narrative bestowed upon Abraham's life was certainly missing from his own life experience.
- Calasso emphasizes the role of separation in Jewish identity. From the onset we learn that they are a people marked by the act of 'physically going away'. After Abraham we learn that they also became a people marked by being chased away from Canaan. Constant movement is essential to understand Jewish identity. If the story of Abraham came after centuries of Jewish history, which seems logical, it would make sense to create a narrative where the Jews had started this movement themselves. Perhaps as a way to justify the torment of being chased away centuries later. It is interesting to note that when Abraham left Ur he wasn't being persecuted. The only reason mentioned was purely theological.
- Who was Abraham? We don't really know anything about him before Yahweh decides to choose him. He is already an old man, and he doesn't seem to be particularly religious, faithful, courageous or interesting. He is quite a regular man, and not even a figure of major authority in his nomadic community. Yahweh wanted to create a nation. To do so he chose the most drastic example of the opposite of a nation he could find: an unremarkable, nomadic old man.
- Israel was special because it was *"the least numerous among the peoples."* Yahweh wanted to create a challenge. But not only for his devotees. Also, for himself: the creation

of a holy land, a stable and strong nation, started by a remarkably unpoetic man and populated by only a few citizens.

- The origin of the word 'Jew' lies in its use to denote someone in a community that doesn't actually belong to that community properly. A social class of outcasts.
- Yahweh demanded from Abraham a bloody sacrifice. Thus begins one of the longest traditions in Jewish history. In order to communicate with God, there must be some sort of violence, a physical offering that's never pleasant to humanity. Sacrifice is one of Calasso's favorite themes. I don't think it can ever be easy to understand the nature of sacrifice, its intention and its importance in human psyche. And its very real weight in daily life. In order to be closer to God one must suffer; the shedding of blood becomes proof that a life is being lived. I think it's safe to say that Christianity worked so incredibly well throughout history because the image of crucified Jesus took this idea to a new graphic limit. And so it was that I myself, as a very young boy growing up in Mexico, learnt to be terrified of human frailty and violence in front of a cross with the body of a bloodied man. The same image that so many adults around me called beautiful.
- We are all putting off the moment before life *has to be hurt*. That is the idea behind sacrifice, hurting something that is precious. So that the whole never recovers. I think the idea has to do with challenging ourselves and the world around us to see how far we can take things, to find new limits. Discussing sacrifice is interesting because I don't quite know what to say about it, yet I think I understand it fairly well. Because it makes me feel a certain way deep down, up to my raw core. In life something has to die. An act must take place and needs to happen, to prove something to someone who is watching somewhere. And it's all coming from a place of instinct.
- Yahweh and Abraham discuss why the latter's wife, Sarah, laughed while Yahweh is giving out instructions. Yahweh gets angry at her laughter and demands an explanation, which Sarah refuses to give. This strange exchange is the only instance where they interact directly. This scene I find poetic in its pure vulgarity. I find it hard to picture this exchange as little more than a succession of embarrassing misunderstandings and childish dares in

a context of miscommunication. Once again Yahweh appears to me as a painfully human entity. A hurt ego.

- Abraham tended to ask Yahweh directly about his intentions and the reasoning behind his decisions. He asks God why some people are chosen and some aren't. Calasso emphasizes that throughout the Bible doubt concerning election is a recurring theme, mostly because election is a heavy and painful burden for the chosen ones. One that can't be solved. In the act of asking itself we find a possible explanation why Abraham wasn't an ordinary human after all. He had the nerve to demand answers from the Lord directly. The lack of answers didn't matter as much as the act of asking. One could even argue that Yahweh probably wanted someone with the ability to challenge him this way. Isn't that after all one of humanity's most defining abilities?
- It is in doubting God that we can find more intimacy with God. Given Yahweh's profoundly enigmatic instructions, Biblical figures couldn't help but constantly doubt divinity and its command.
- Abraham's intent to sacrifice Isaac is one of the well-known episodes in the Bible. It is deeply shocking and poetic. According to Calasso, Abraham had to be willing to sacrifice his beloved son in order to experience the miracle of not having to kill him after all. *Inhuman terror followed by divine relief*. Abraham had been tested. Yahweh wanted him to feel like he had a choice, before making it clear to him that he never did in the first place. This is how the Bible talks about the complicated and eternal subject of free will.
- Job is presented as the archetype of a just man, who falls deeper and deeper into despair and misery and yet never curses God for his disgrace. Job, like Abraham, is also one of God's chosen ones. But there is a major difference: Abraham is chosen to fulfil an important mission that will affect the course of history. Job is chosen to suffer to demonstrate a point. He is a just man who suffers for no apparent reason. The Bible is the story of a group of individuals who suffer endlessly, bearing the weight of being constantly observed by God.
- Calasso points out that the Bible dedicates a whole chapter to Creation and it also dedicates a whole chapter to Abraham purchasing a tomb for his wife. We are given just

about the same amount of detail for these two stories. An interesting observation would be that the purchase of a tomb is considerably easier to talk about.

- For the Jews it was essential to *buy* that which is sacred and truly important. Which is indeed the opposite of what we find in most cultures.
- Abraham wasn't given any rule for life by Yahweh except that of circumcision. Everything else would be given to Moses centuries later. This might seem like a strange misstep by Yahweh. How were the Jews able to function and live before it? Trusting the voice of a God that didn't give them anything to work with. The Torah had always existed, and it had always been the guiding principle of humanity. Yet it wasn't revealed to anyone before Moses. However, even if the Jews weren't familiar with the Torah they were already living by it, because they had been chosen to stand God's test. It is through examples like these that I am inspired to see the Bible as a work of literary and poetic magnificence, but not as a text to be taken too literally. Which again, is far from necessary.
- Isaac takes Rebecca as his wife after his mother's death. He loves her. She helps him cope with Sarah's passing. Calasso categorizes this scene as one of the quickest and most poignant love stories in literature.
- The Jews were chosen out of a promise Yahweh made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they weren't chosen for their merit.
- The terror Isaac felt as he was sure his father would murder him would survive for the generations after him. It became a very organic and palpable mark of distinction amongst Jews.
- Jacob wrestled with an angel for hours and afterwards he was renamed Israel. This is one of those poetic scenes from the Bible that I find deeply moving.
- The Bible wants to explain the story of a people, starting off with their earliest ancestors; the text never attempts to hide or correct the misery of its protagonists. It is a succession of events that can't ever be truly unraveled, because they are all so singularly complicated and profound. And yet all of these events are necessary. They form a block of meaning and ideas that can't be penetrated. Why events happen the way they do isn't ever

completely clear, nor is the motivation of the people involved ever fully explained. In this sense the Bible does resemble the study of world history.

- The story makes it clear that both good and evil are necessary, and that one of them can lead to the other without wanting to. In a word, humanity isn't meant to understand what it is exactly that it's doing.
- Jacob is the last of the patriarchs. After him, the children of Israel were settled as a people. The mission given to Abraham had already succeeded.
- The time spent in Egypt is one of the major episodes in the creation of Jewish identity: the Jews as persecuted outcasts. And not just anywhere but in the kingdom of all kingdoms, Egypt, the very definition of institutionalized and long-lived powerful realms. Egypt was the radical opposite of Israel. So, it seems fitting that Yahweh would have his people challenge the biggest of all threats and powers. And it also seems logical that later generations would present themselves as the descendants of the winners in a struggle against the most powerful and respected of all entities in the ancient world. Yahweh desperately wanted to defy Egypt and its polytheist tradition. Yahweh wanted above all to be acknowledged as a new and different kind of divinity. Being recognized as such by Egypt meant being recognized by "the world at large".
- The eternal enemy of the Jews were the Amalekites. The objective of the children of Israel concerning their dearest foe contemplated nothing less than complete annihilation. They wanted to exterminate their enemy and virtually destroy their culture and tradition. The hateful Jewish description of the Amalekites as a people in need of extermination would be later directly adopted by antisemites against Jews themselves. Calasso: the root of the hatred for the Jews was already stated clearly in the Bible itself.
- After Moses led the Jews out of Egypt they settled in the desert. Alone. For years, isolated from anyone or anything else besides themselves. They were difficult periods of hardship, because Yahweh had once again decided to put his devotees to the test.
- The Jews were given a supreme and undeniable set of rules to follow unconditionally in the form of the Ten Commandments. Amongst them was the prohibition of picturing other gods or 'idols', a ban on images and representations. Calasso argues this is an

enormously important point since it established a different relationship between humankind and the cosmos: no longer would men be allowed to imagine supernatural and powerful images meant to be adored. The idea, as I understand it, is that this restriction is of huge significance because it altered the relationship between humankind and the symbolic power of endless imagination. Calasso labels this change 'the most powerful of weapons'.

- Moses wasn't told much about death. The rules were concerned with life. What happens afterwards wasn't explained. In this the Jews were different to virtually all contemporary religions and cultures.
- By definition the Jews weren't a people led by their own decision-making. In fact, Yahweh had made that explicitly clear in the most violent way possible when he had made Abraham powerless as he was faced with murdering his son. Even as they settled in the land of Israel and essentially conquered the territory, they weren't proper conquerors.
- When Moses returned to Canaan, the Jews had been living outside of that land for a long time. They knew nothing about it: it was only a mysterious name they read in a book that was meant to be significant and promising. This would happen again throughout Jewish history. Palestine would be little more than a name in a book.
- The figure of the prophet enters the story after Moses. Men qualified to announce events that would eventually take place. Interestingly enough, prophets were the mouthpieces of facts.
- Yahweh forbid any form of imitation: the Jews were meant to be different and clearly differentiated from any other nation on earth. To accommodate any foreign belief or custom meant betraying the Law, which was the only true percept and axiom the Jews had. In fact, imitation was thereafter labeled as the first of all evils.
- Moses died alone, unlike his forefathers, whose fate is pictured as a demise surrounded by loved ones. To this day it isn't even clear where Moses' tomb is located.
- In the late 1930's Freud suggested that Moses wasn't a Jew but an Egyptian and that he had singlehandedly created the idea of the Jew himself. Thus, he denied the identity of a whole people. And what's even more interesting is that he denied his own identity as well.

It's a powerful idea, a big statement that couldn't be said lightly, which Freud understood very well. He also suggested that the pride of Jewish culture, monotheism, was an Egyptian invention as well. The Jews were therefore just imitators of foreign ideas. Understanding a figure such as Moses brings about this kind of delicate problem since Moses isn't a human or historical figure. Because he is essentially mythological, he can only function through the narrative of identity, which one could say entails by definition deep emotion and personal feeling. It's a problem similar to the one Christians encountered while the basic ideas of their new religion were being established: there was no consensus on who Jesus was or what he said or what he did or didn't do. But the question was nevertheless deeply important to those involved. Hence, we find that Freud's theory on Moses is just another version of Moses, not a destruction of the figure. Because Moses never existed in the first place. Once he destroys Jewish identity, Freud 'compensates' them by saying they were nonetheless the bringers of a 'real progress in spirituality' through history. Such a major statement illustrates the complexities of academic work, as well as its limitations and its hidden reliance on mythology and personal feeling.

- One of the important characteristics of Jewish religion and culture is its focus on the mind. Calasso argues that the Jews, far from conquerors or imperialists, 'took refuge in the domains of the mind'. And that such a reaction would prove hugely influential to the course of history. Freud wanted the Jews to be negated and yet still remain chosen. And on his way, he annuls Yahweh altogether, extracting the main religious element from Jewish history.
- One of the ideas I can't quite understand in Freud's version of Moses is that the Jews themselves allegedly killed him, their father. His followers literally killed him after having created the concept of Judaism. Freud then extrapolated from this horrible action the conclusion that the Jews killed their father and that their whole history was an attempt to "hide away from that shame". Freud himself wanted to redeem himself of the ghost of Moses, the dead father he had killed indirectly.

- The last pages of the section in Calasso's book that explore Freud's idea of humanity killing God and then the Jews killing Moses, is by far the most confusing and unclear in the whole book for me. If I understand one of the main ideas (perhaps the biggest idea), it is that humanity became a Predator once it figured out how to create its own rules, symbolically killing a fatherly presence. I do find it important to say that Calasso himself writes cautiously when discussing Freud's theory; he remains unconvinced, it seems to me. But also fascinated.
- In a book discussing the Bible it does seem relevant to analyze the ideas of one of the most famous and influential thinkers in all of Jewish history. I can understand why Calasso dedicated a whole chapter to Freud, which did seem a bit surprising to me at first. After all, the book can't help but be an exploration of Jewish identity, and identity is an organic entity regardless of time or place. One of Freud's objectives in exploring Moses and deconstructing Judaism came from the desire to find an explanation for Anti-Semitism, a sentiment that was growing violently in Europe at the time, but also "a sentiment he probably shared himself".
- From the start the Bible attempts to establish an order, a narrative of how things work and why. And what to do about it. But such a structure is always destined to change, it can't help but transform. And the Laws meant to guide people along are also subjected to this change.
- The Paradise inhabited by Adam and Eve would be remembered by the rest of humanity as a perfection that had been lost. The memory of that perfection would haunt their descendants forever, as something to return to and something to achieve. Something that is undeniably better than the present. And something that can happen, because it happened already once in history.
- God couldn't give eternal life to Adam and Eve. But he did give them knowledge. In other words, they couldn't stay in a state of perfection and perpetual peace. They had to go out into the real world and suffer. But they would be given a set of tools to figure out why and how. Alas, suffering is Yahweh's intent and purpose for humanity. And Jewish history as narrated in the Bible is a clear example of that.

- Because Adam and Eve instinctively wanted to cover their naked bodies, they realized they were different to the animals around them. The latter seemed content with not adding anything to themselves. But the humans couldn't help but desire a modification of their present state. They were incomplete. They were experimenting *need*. And humanity would never stop experimenting need.
- Both Elohim and Yahweh are nowadays understood to mean the same God, the one supreme divinity in the Bible. Back then they were probably two very different ideas.
- With choosing to eat the forbidden apple came consciousness. Whether there is such a thing as free will is an impossible question to solve, although for Yahweh the answer is clear. No, there isn't such a thing. There is only the illusion of free choice, which is what really matters. The same thing happened with Abraham and Isaac, when a father suddenly experimented the illusion of having decided to kill his son. Both that episode and the eating of the apple illustrate the importance of consciousness. That it wasn't free will isn't nearly as important as being aware. Awareness emerges as one of the most important aspects of the human condition, a conclusion that I definitely share and have shared for some time.
- No religious text or practice had ever claimed that the story of the world came from sin and guilt. Which explains the focus of both Judaism and Christianity on redemption, the act of paying for that sin. To me it seems logical that such a view of the world and of humanity would lead to very violent results.
- Another moment of great beauty in the Bible: Adam gets sick at 932 years old. He is the first human to ever get sick and to ever experience illness. His son Seth imagines that this sickness has to do with nostalgia for Paradise, so he plans to return there and bring a paradisiac fruit for his dying father, to cure his lethal nostalgia. But Seth isn't aware that a Cherubim with a flying sword won't allow him to enter. This scene makes me think: it was then that humanity realized everything had changed.
- Evil wanted to accompany men everywhere, it wanted to be a part of him. And men are charged with the mission of conquering it. Interestingly, it isn't only evil that wants to be

a partner of man. Women also want to be essential to him, and they are categorized on the same level as evil.

- Why must a living being be killed to approach the invisible? Once again Calasso wonders why this transaction, sacrifice, is present in every culture throughout history. He has no answer, and neither does any culture. Maybe because humankind has to settle a debt with God? After all, if one can feel that God isn't pleased then one can feel when God is pleased. This feeling, beyond any theoretical or theological explanation must be the key.
- The Bible will not reassure us. Every piece of information that it gives us; every possible interpretation and meaning is forever incomplete and leaves the reader with more and more questions. It is a particularly talented text when it comes to the art of omission. Yet it is also talented when it comes to repeating ideas obsessively. Upon closer inspection, the Bible emerges as a truly fascinating piece of human endeavor. Inexhaustible. Both ambiguous and poignant. Pure feeling. This is probably why its relevance has been constant since it was conceived. Quite simply inexhaustible.
- Yahweh decided to restart humanity with the flood. Yet afterwards nothing was solved and men were still evil. And then Yahweh suddenly "accepted" this. Nature however would never be corrupted by humankind. It would remain indifferent. But humanity was clearly different from the rest of nature; the contrast was always important to Yahweh. What isn't clear is whether he accepted the contrast or created it.
- Why was humanity destined to be evil? Why would Yahweh allow such a thing? No one knows. And every possible explanation must end with a strange and axiomatic conclusion.
- Centuries after the Old Testament had already established itself as the center of Judaism, one of its main precepts, sacrifice, would be condemned by new interpretations. And a radical change in religion would take place. Jesus was one of those new interpreters, who suggested that to sacrifice is to condemn and destroy an innocent life. This is a change so radical that it is truly difficult to appreciate its influence and scope. And it also shows Jesus as what he actually was during his lifetime: a heretic who challenged the very foundation of divine Law.

- Jesus showed the importance of thought as a powerful force, even beyond sacrifice or religious act. There is something more subtle hiding under everything, something that has to do with intention. And with human fragility.
- Both Paradise and the Tower of Babel are examples of a glorious unity that was broken. In Paradise humanity was calm and in a state of perfection. Free of any form of anxiety. While building the Tower humanity was together and focused on a single project. Humanity existed as a single and peaceful identity. Both episodes provide a poetic explanation of why things are the way they are, of why there is suffering in the world. They both come from a desire to idealize something that isn't present.
- Yahweh not only wanted to monopolize religious cult. He also wanted to monopolize history.
- A prophet often has to announce incoming destruction and suffering. And then he has to suffer it himself.
- Throughout the story of the Bible, we find chosen individuals whose power lies in their capacity of seeing evil and reporting its presence. Noble is the one who recognizes evil and warns other people. Having the ability to annul evil it is a very different matter. One could say that this is the delicate role that Jesus played.
- *"My aim is to fill them with horror, so that they would know that I am Yahweh."*
- One of the most fascinating phrases in the Bible: *"I am who I am"*. Yahweh explains everything by saying pretty much *nothing* at all.
- It's hard to believe that everything narrated in the Bible should come from the same story of Genesis, that it is all allegedly the same story.
- The Jews prided themselves in their being different to nations around them, and it had always been Yahweh's plan to isolate them completely from everyone else. Yet when they established themselves in Jerusalem, they forced themselves to conform to history around them; the Middle East is a particularly volatile and changing region in world history, a location where there always seems to exist yet another 'before'.
- It is basically impossible to understand the radical change that the destruction of the Second Temple meant for the Jews. Everything that had been established and understood

about them had changed forever. What was considered Judaism back then was probably unlike any form of Judaism that persists today. That is one of the vicissitudes of identity.

- After the Romans destroyed the Second Temple the Jews were both physically and culturally persecuted: the early seeds of Anti-Semitism had been planted. Christianity expanded as the Jews scattered through the globe, destined to become infamous outcasts. Then again, the word 'Jew' had always meant outcast.
- As Christianity grew Judaism was going through a period of reorganization and reformation. The Christian cult eventually became the state religion of the very Empire that had murdered its founder. The branch religion and its original religion were taking very different paths forward. Yet there was an important similarity: both had renounced blood sacrifices. This is a turning point in world history, Calasso argues. A departure from the practices that had been the norm in world history up to that point.
- The private study of the Torah replaced the necessity for blood sacrifices: the sphere of the purely intellectual had replaced the need for violence. This study of subtleties and subjectivity, found in an inexhaustible and unlimited text, became the main activity of the Jews. And thus, it was that Rabbinic Judaism started. Interestingly, one of the major Jewish scholars in history, Maimonides, would suggest that the only human impulse strong enough to actually rival study is sex.
- Centuries after Moses had announced the divine Law to humanity new prophets started predicting the coming of the 'Kingdom of God'. What that means exactly is, of course, impossible to discern with real certainty. But what was clear was that Moses' Law was itself subjected to change and mutability. That even *that* holy precept isn't immune to the passing of time.
- The times of the Messiah were very different times to what had gone on before. Everything would stay the same except for 'the word': the only change will be in understanding. I think what this is trying to say is that after a certain period in world history subjectivity becomes respected and it gets treated as a new point of departure. Humanity comes to understand that nature behaves a certain way, divinely indifferent and continuous despite human presence. So, the human reaction is to explore humanity

itself, which is precisely that which seems to be 'outside of nature'. The new miracles would take place in the intellect. I am reminded of Buddha, whose 'discovery' was that life takes place in the mind and that subjectivity is unavoidable.

- Even though blood sacrifices had stopped, Christianity developed under the image of a bloody man tortured and mutilated on a cross. It was as if that one gruesome sacrifice had been so profound and important that it had removed sacrifices altogether. And not only that, but the man on the cross had been holy and divine himself, a part of God, or maybe even God himself. What bigger sacrifice could there ever be?
- Once Adam's guilt has been canceled and everything returns to its original state of perfection, the Torah will rearrange all of its letters and change.
- What one prophet employs as the description of messianic times, times of drastic betterment for humanity, is the allegory of running water and flourishing nature. Of a nature that becomes even more fluid and beautiful than it was before. Fluidity is used as a metaphor for happiness. I equate this in my mind to the feeling of lightness that I've always yearned for in my life.
- The messianic state is impossible to define. Yet it's relevant because everyone can picture what it would be like. It's never far from the most daily aspects of human life. Everyone knows instinctively that there is such a thing. Like a Sufi poet calling to go back home.
- The Messiah is going to come. And he will pass unobserved. And he will change only some small things. No one knows which. The proof that he is real is found in the sentence used for prayer: "You who revive the dead".

Calasso closes this magnificent book with two utterly beautiful and deeply confusing sentences, whose meaning I can only imagine, but that move me to my very core. The Messiah as an anonymous figure of subtle action. Someone that has the power to do the undoable: change the world through silence and revive the dead. Everyone can picture a Messiah, a figure that is unspeakably better than anything in our current world. Someone that will solve all the obvious problems in life that nevertheless no one can seem to solve.

Ka: Stories of the Mind and Gods of India:

- One of the laws of the metaphysical world is that “there is always a residue”. Everything that happens carries with it an unavoidable influence and weight, however seemingly imperceptible. “And every residue is a beginning”. There is a constant cycle of birth, development and transformation. In Hinduism this process is particularly important; its culture and philosophy explicitly mirror this continuous change. An endless cycle of ideas in constant variation and dialogue. Before Shiva, before Brahma, before Vishnu or Krishna we can always find another figure preceding their names, a previous incarnation whose residue created those familiar names. What is the residue? That which is manifest.
- “A Brahman is one who feeds himself by feeding on himself”. One who is self-sufficient. One who is *never alone*.
- The Rig Veda mentions *Ka* as the divine recipient of sacrifices. But *Ka* also means the word ‘who’. Thus, divinity is equaled to a mystery, that which can’t be named or understood. It’s a powerful presence that is obviously there but still shrouded in unavoidable mystery. This wordplay illustrates the paramount importance of losing one’s identity in order to reach that which is *beyond*, in order to reach the rhetorical. Because the divine is essentially rhetorical.
- “There is nothing before the mind”. The mind perceives before being able to discern whether the mind is real or not. That question becomes an impossible conundrum. Yet the fact is the mind does desire, even before settling the question of its own existence.

Desire is thus one of the most essential aspects of human life, one that naturally drives and forces beyond conscience or awareness. And what the mind desires above all is to feel like it possesses a *self*. To feel *full* and clearly defined. It therefore tries to feel as something that it isn't. And suffers because of it.

- In this book I've come across one of the best explanations of the human mind: "an eye watching an eye". "There was consciousness and there was an eye watching consciousness."
- One of the core underlying ideas in Hinduism is that everything is connected through a series of correspondences, an initially invisible thread uniting all phenomena according to an inherent logic, a logic that can be recognized through attention and careful observation. And this logic goes beyond the gods, beyond death. "Whether I am alive or not, the equivalences shall be forever".
- Once enough patient work has taken place it becomes clear that "every solitude is illusory" because "there is always an intruder". That is why a Brahman decides to be alone. That is the closest one can get to this concept referred to as 'happiness'. A place where loneliness is impossible.
- It is in the mind alone that all those secret relationships are seen. And in identifying them the viewer gets a clear sense of 'eternity', a feeling of having beaten the most powerful of all forces, time. Because the correspondences are timeless, and by understanding them one can, in a way, also become timeless. Death therefore means very little when compared to this supreme achievement. Worse than death would have been to be inexact in life.
- *Ka* is silence. *Ka* is an interrogation that doesn't beg for an answer. *Ka* is the mind being comfortable with the mind's existence.
- "This is the only way to live. We are not so ingenious as to imagine that our building is sound." Yet the uncertainty of the building isn't severe as long as the question is repeated with respect: *who?*
- Calasso suggests that the act of sacrifice is linked to a sense of profound guilt because it stems from humanity's conscious decision to become predators instead of continuing to

be victims. Thus far they had been like antelopes, and now they had decided to declare their supremacy over antelopes themselves. But by killing the antelopes they were also killing what they had been and what they still were, in a way. This empathetic sense of guilt therefore surrounds the act of sacrifice. And the sacrifice itself is necessary because it is the only way to access that which is beyond this “world of untruth”.

- In love there is always “an absentee”, an empty space that the mind wants to fill in order to satisfy its desperate desire. This sensation of dissatisfaction is painful yet it is also the natural reaction to the mind’s constant desire; and this pain is far more important than the question of whether or not the mind exists or not. Because the suffering remains. So, what is the important question here? Whether or not there is *someone* inside the sufferer watching him suffer.
- The *Rishis* are the sages, the enlightened ones mentioned in Vedic literature, who are depicted as being submerged in the practice of *tapas*. What this exactly means isn’t entirely clear but it has to do with meditation and silent patience: it was simply *what the Rishis did*, constantly and intensely throughout their life. The lack of certainty of an external observer in regard to their practice isn’t nearly as important as the practice itself as experienced by them. The point being that they couldn’t ever actually explain it. Like wondering who is *Ka*, there is something profoundly rhetorical about such a question, something that feels, in a way, unnecessary and redundant. The *Rishis* were experts in “the sensation of being alive. We are wakeful- or, if you like, we vegetate.”
- There is a recurrent concept in religion and philosophy concerned with how “ultimate knowledge can only become manifest through enigma”. Perhaps one of its clearest invocations is in the Zohar, which states the world exists only through mystery. Yet in Hinduism it is also mentioned that enigmas are what come from Brahman, from that which is higher than humanity and only sometimes understandable. And the way to know for sure that an individual is on the right path is by realizing the only possible solutions are “enigmas of a higher order”. Here we find again the relevance of the rhetorical. Because “the gods love that which is mysterious and dismiss that which is evident.”

- By far one of the most interesting, poignant and poetic paragraphs in this book comes with the description of a horse sacrifice, where the sacrificer invokes the name of *Ka* while killing the animal in a bloody ritual. What emerges is the image of an individual immersed in an action who is, at the same time, calling out to understand *who* is performing the action: *Ka (who) is doing this*. And by doing so he acknowledges the lack of authority he has: even his actions aren't actually his. Why must he kill the horse? It is essentially impossible to answer such a question. Is *he* killing the horse? The whole situation is elusive, and in order to make sense of this elusiveness and its mystery he is forced to call out to a more powerful force, renouncing his own agency and identity in the process.
- Only certain people have access to the knowledge of the mysterious and its unsolvable enigmas, because otherwise the world would become "paralyzed". The world must always pursue its course, so real knowledge is given to those that don't have any interest in stopping this course and will allow it to continue, even when they carry supreme knowledge with them.
- "Knowledge is not an answer but a defiant question: Ka?"
- Calasso tackles an enormous question with a very interesting reflection. The history of most nations and cultures begins with the story of a king, or a succession of powerful individuals. But the history of India begins with the enigmatic image of a *Rishi* navigating the secrets of *Brahman* and practicing *tapas*. The meaning of a king, his power, violence and his political authority is quite clear, they are universal and easily understandable. Yet the concept of *Brahman*, *tapas* or a *Rishi* would require further thought and patience, it's far more confusing, maybe even profoundly original. From the beginning, India was destined to a historical development quite unique and exceptional, centered around philosophical musings concerned with the nature of the mind and consciousness, as seen through the image of an enigmatic *Rishi*, immersed in what seems to be easily labeled as 'thinking'. This image is the cornerstone of Vedic culture, which would go on to establish its supremacy over the whole peninsula of India and even travel beyond its frontiers. The Aryans had one real interest, and that was the intellect. They left behind their language and their cult, words and gods. And, according to the evidence, nothing else. They left

behind their enigmas, which they clearly considered divine and deep enough to be remembered beyond more material achievements. For “what else did one need”? Their one concern was the “simple fact of being conscious”, which could easily claim a higher level of hierarchy and importance than any other concern. For that is *the* axiom.

- The ascetic secretly wants the world to flourish, despite his explicit intention to renounce it and transcend it. Calasso argues this can be seen in how every important ascetic figure is accompanied by a woman. And not only a woman, but a woman of exemplarily beauty. This is mirrored in one of the sage Yajñavalkya’s remarks: man is composed of himself and a void, “hence that void is filled by woman”. And the Upanishads also mirror this by stating that love of another is in fact just love of *Atman*, or the true self hidden in the mind. There is, after all, always “an absentee” in love.
- What is *Atman*? One of the central questions in all Hinduism can be answered by the phrase: “the one who knows”. Human endeavor is therefore just an attempt to “know the one who knows”.
- The magnificent strength of the mind lies in the fact that it can’t be grasped. Therefore, it is sovereign.
- What in the Western world came to be conceptualized as the binary thesis and antithesis was in Hinduism a complete statement. Not a composite of two different and contrasting ideas. There was no clash, no conflict. The contradiction, the opposition, was simply natural.
- In order to grasp the deeper meaning in life, one has to abandon society and its blind customs. One has to step outside and then look in, as an external observer. In the process, there is the establishment of an ‘other’. The observant is alone. He causes terror. And he feels terror himself. What makes India such a fertile land for intense intellectual activity is that in its culture there is an institutionalized interest in taking this step outside of society. This moment in which solitude and loneliness invade the life of certain individuals is supposed to happen at a certain point.

- “He who knows transforms himself”. “One becomes what one thinks”. The power of the mind can engulf the individual, even if it is an intelligent and capable one. This is the idea behind a phrase repeated in the book: “thinking is dangerous”.
- Calasso remarks there is “no story as complicated as the Mahabharata.” Despite the profound and infinite philosophical, religious and metaphysical observations that make up the incredibly long story that is the Mahabharata, this complexity is actually best seen in *how* the text tells its story. Its many chapters, its many stories that diverge into new and different stories, are meant to be understood as an infinite amalgam of endless narratives. There is no clear beginning and there is no clear end. It’s a story being told inside a story, which is also inside a story. There is no ‘edge’ to be found in the Mahabharata. Because there is always a residue: something has already happened before, something that is necessary and must be narrated. We can try to start at the beginning, yet the beginning is never the *actual* beginning, it is just what we found as an approximation to a beginning. And this is why the Mahabharata aims to be a text where *everything* is found: “what isn’t in the Mahabharata isn’t in life.” The development and glorification of this epic, along with the *Ramayana*, represent a major historical change: Vedic texts apparently weren’t sufficient by themselves anymore. Now a story had to be told.
- Calasso sharply notes how the Mahabharata is one of the earliest attempts in history to try and express everything as a definitive last word on human affairs. Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and Richard Wagner’s *Ring* cycle are epic works of a similar scope and intention, albeit a very different style and delivery. But what seems interesting is the focus on holding, presenting and explaining *everything*. Trying to mirror the wholeness that characterizes life. And this kind of works are often deeply beloved or abhorred, precisely because they are “too much”.
- What has been called ‘world history’ is what happens in the lifespan of the three final reincarnations of Vishnu. Krishna appears as one of the main figures in the Mahabharata, an essential agent in the war that changed the world forever and commenced the *Kali Yuga*, the current era of suffering that we are living in. Afterwards Vishnu came back as

the Buddha, marking the transition from the era of heroes and epic battles to an era of recorded history and a more peaceful, meditation-oriented lifestyle. The last avatar, riding a white horse and announcing the end of the world, hasn't arrived yet. The more than 2000-year gap that has already passed after Buddha's death has been a mere fraction of the time humanity will have to wait before Vishnu returns.

- Before Krishna, seven avatars had battled to restore the cosmic balance to the world. The values and roles involved in this narrative are simple: good versus evil, order versus chaos. And Vishnu always emerged victorious, having restored the world to its balance. Yet with Krishna and the Mahabharata everything becomes considerably more ambiguous: humanity seems to take on a more prominent role, with Krishna serving as a powerful and influential spectator, but not the sole protagonist anymore. The narrative has a more difficult time establishing roles. And what's even more important: the Great War means the beginning of the *Kali Yuga*, the era of suffering. The cosmic balance isn't simply restored. With Buddha the situation changes even more dramatically: the conflicts aren't taking place in the battlefield; they aren't fought through physical violence. Instead, they are in the mind. And there is no epic tone, no seemingly eternal succession of epic events. Instead, we have a quiet monk taking center stage, focused on understanding the mind and on cultivating awareness. Exactly the way the *Rishis* used to do.
- The heterogeneity that characterizes Hinduism can be poetically exemplified through two contrasting images: on the one hand, the Rishis focusing on the mind and being aware of consciousness, disregarding the idea of God, creation or freedom, highlighting human authority. On the other, the intense personal devotion shown to a beloved figure like Krishna, often taken as a representation of something like a holy covenant between superior divinity and its human servants. Both the evident non-existence of the divine and its intense adoration can be found in Hinduism. And precisely in tone with its tenets, this contrast is not some sort of mistake or contradiction.
- It is certainly interesting to think that Arjuna, the greatest amongst all the great warriors, was forced to admit his weakness and doubt to his charioteer, who also turned out to be the supreme personality of God. But that to the rest of the world, outside of Krishna, he

was, and never stopped being, the greatest of all warriors, the most courageous of all men.

- Buddha was absorbed into Hindu mythology by becoming the latest of Vishnu's avatars. Yet there was absolutely nothing holy about his doctrine. In fact, it started out as precisely the opposite of a religious doctrine. How little the real Buddha actually had to do with his reception by posterity is also mirrored in the fact that his teaching eventually became a widespread religion, often complete with gods and hells, which by all accounts was far from what the Buddha endeavored to teach.
- The main idea behind the Buddha's life mission was to stop the residue of human life, to cease completely. This was a challenging idea, because it was a given that everything in life inevitably *left something behind*. But one day, when he was still a child, he was watching his father work in the fields and suddenly realized there was nothing to add nor to subtract from the scene. He felt perfectly content and happy, uninterested in any sort of change. There was no desire in his mind. Everything felt complete and he, in turn, felt light and empty, perennially comfortable. There was nothing left to do. His whole life was a gesture of farewell. He knew he had achieved perfection because he didn't want to act anymore. Thus, nothing interested him.
- There is a powerful similarity between the Buddha's doctrine and the Upanishads, a similarity perhaps made even clearer by strong contrasts. The Buddha stresses how emptiness corresponds with emptiness. The Upanishads remark how fullness is constant and indivisible, even when divided. The Buddha notes the correspondences that make up the Upanishads, which those texts depict as essential, yet the lone renouncer dismisses them as something to be surpassed, not observed or cherished. Yet how can they not be a part of the Buddha's doctrine? They are, after all, the veins of the world that he is trying to renounce. Both emptiness and fullness are essentially the same thing: they are a *whole*. And understanding wholeness entails the possibility of surpassing the world. The Upanishads, after all, also presented the best-case scenario for humanity as the 'cessation' of returning to this world, just like the Buddha.

- The Buddha wanted to explain how the seemingly unavoidable residue of human existence could be wiped out. In other words, there is a way to stop your interaction with the world and leave it permanently, to stop affecting it and ensure this lack of interaction even after death. It isn't by dying, but rather by breaking the cycle of birth and death altogether. Yet if this was the main idea of the doctrine, then the Buddha failed: the residue he left was his teaching, passed on by his ardent follower Ananda. Whether it was his intention to pass on this knowledge in such a way, that is difficult to say. Perhaps his karmic residue had been wiped out. But he went on to become one of the most influential individuals in world history.
- This book is centered around a main recurring idea: "the first world was always at least the second." There is always *more* to be found, something *else* that will justly put in doubt what had previously seemed definitive. And in this infinite process of mystery what humanity is left with is the act of looking. Being an eye inside an eye.

This incredibly complicated book is one of the best books I've ever read.

Ardor"

- From every possible perspective, the Aryans that developed Vedic culture are mysterious figures and "distant beings". Even for the ancient inhabitants of Northern India they were an enigma of the past. The only thing that is known about them were the obsessive and extensive words they left concerning their rituals, where they mention the importance of consuming a plant known as soma. In their texts it is mentioned that they weren't able to find this plant anymore, that it was already something of a distant and unapproachable

past, much like they were to become themselves to world history later on. Much like how Achilles grieves over the great heroes of a great era that has already passed.

- Vedic culture was all about the invisible. Their focus and objective as a people were to establish the correct and most accurate relationship between the invisible and the visible. The only thing they cared about was this delicate connection, which is expressed directly in their texts. Nothing else seemed important to them, which is most likely why they didn't leave behind anything material or mundane and only that which is unrivalled in depth and spiritual complexity. They are unique in world history, for their lack of imperial or military arrogance. Their only worry was an accurate relationship to the divine. Their ambition is perhaps unparalleled in world history.
- Vedic culture is a unique phenomenon because it was a profoundly religious and esoteric system of belief, but it was also interestingly modern, rational and humanistic in its approach to the human mind. This can be seen clearly in the Rig Veda: ***"Who really knows? [...] Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of the universe. Who knows whence it has arisen? Whence this creation has arisen -perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not- the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows- or perhaps he does not know."*** True knowledge is another term for lack of knowledge, for accepting a mystery. What is most amazing in this sentence however, is that the Aryans also felt it was necessary to declare this mystery involves even the gods.
- The Aryans didn't feel the need to leave anything behind but their relationship with the divine through sacrifice, because they thought the whole world was *nothing but sacrifice*. Everything human was already explained in those complicated rituals and everything else was self-explanatory. The whole earth was sacred.
- Another example of the 'modern' and even humanistic vision of Vedic culture: the Rishis, the sages, those who dedicate themselves to constant contemplation and thought, were considered far more powerful and authoritative than a strong army or a mighty king. The supremacy of the mind is one of the essential tenets of Vedic culture, the power of the symbol, of awareness and of the human capacity to establish meaning beyond that which is literal and material.

- In Indian culture history has never had an important role, hence the mystery that underlies the subcontinent's development, especially during its earliest period. The concept of 'history', as it came to be developed and exported by the West, has no real currency in early Indian culture, precisely because it is tracing that which is human; yet human affairs are by definition not meant to be important. In Indian culture there is an obsessive interest in determining the precise chronology of divine time and universal eras, which often deal in incredibly specific numbers and categories; yet there is a parallel silence and indifference when it comes to human eras. The only human acts worth noting were those related to rituals, because it was only through those acts that humans could interact with the divine. *Everything else was not real.*
- Sacrifice was necessary so that life could continue. It was this conscious act that was needed and, according to Calasso, no culture in world history has ever been so detailed in explaining how to proceed with the ritual of sacrifice, and perhaps no other civilization has been as ambitious in its objective in doing so: "so that the eternal banquet between the visible and the invisible could go on."
- Because the Vedic texts deal with humanity's relationship with the invisible, the many ideas, practices and observations found within tend to contradict one another. Yet this is characteristic of Indian culture and thought, where contradiction and direct conflict isn't seen as a *mistake* to be corrected, but rather as a natural and unavoidable difference in human life and perception.
- *A state of consciousness* is what the Aryans actually wanted to achieve. It was *an awareness*, compared to which there was nothing more powerful. No act was worthier, no thought was more important. It was simply the fact of being *aware*. *Of knowing*, which is seen in the word Veda, "to know". Nothing was more important than that state of the mind. In Vedic culture the only way to reach any possible version of salvation comes from knowing.
- Being aware of the fact that one is aware and thinking: this is the basic precept of Vedic culture. The unavoidable and ultimate axiom. It is the same thing as being *free from fear*, free from anxiety.

- This state of awareness means being aware of Brahman, the wholeness of everything and the ultimate reality of an organic totality that is self-explanatory. But *by this awareness of Brahman the individual becomes Brahman himself. It is the act of the human becoming divine.*
- Once this awareness has been reached every possible interest in building an empire or in establishing a chronology of history becomes unnecessary and redundant, even more of an obstacle than anything else. It is essentially what Krishna would go on to teach Arjuna later on: the material aspects of life and its actions become hollow, because something greater has been found in the invisible.
- In order to reach this knowledge and awareness one must *burn*. The true act of thinking creates what was known as *tapas*, translated as *burning*. It is a symptom of successful thinking and accurate observation. Thinking is therefore *an act*, the most organic and important of all actions. We are told that “no one *burns* like the sun”.
- Vedic culture is absolutely clear on one difficult point: there is another *world*, another *realm*, that of the invisible, which is superior to the world of the visible we are in. They are in constant communication. Our world is meant to be surpassed by listening attentively to this communication, which at first is hidden. This negates the importance of this world, the necessity to transform it or to improve human life. *It is something to be surpassed.*
- Vedic culture does not attempt to provide an answer for every question in human life, especially not for those concerned with the beginning or ending of things. Even amongst the Rishis and the wise kings that are meant to be seen as superior figures that have reached awareness, some questions are left explicitly unanswered, and the texts make no effort to hide this fact: even in a state of awareness there remains a sense of mystery to life. Acceptance of this fact is part of this awareness.
- Approaching this mystery is usually called the ‘esoteric’, where the act of questioning is far more important than any definite answers. Because the esoteric is by definition ambiguous, unpractical and symbolic, it is often marginalized in cultures throughout

history. Yet in Vedic India it was at the very forefront of what human activity had to focus on.

- “Wherever there is a Brahman there will also be sacrifice”, an equation Calasso compares with Thomas Mann’s words: “wherever I am you will also find the German language.” An understanding of culture and rhetoric as something that an individual carries and which embodies a detailed cosmogony.
- Despite all of the accurate claims and detailed explanations that are found in the Vedic texts, silence is reserved for the most mysterious of mysteries, death. In the Upanishads, when King Yama is asked about death his answer is profoundly direct: “I will answer your questions, ask me about anything else, but do not ask me about death.” What is done every day is just an act to keep death away. Nothing could ever be an attempt to eliminate or abolish death, not even to understand it. It is all just an attempt to be at peace with and not fall “prey” to it. Again, it is all about an awareness that scares fear away.
- To understand what the mind is in Vedic culture, which would then be inherited by Buddhism, it has to be understood as that which “doesn’t allow to claim any certainties about its presence or its absence.” The mind is itself a component of the esoteric, a bridge of sorts. A mystery that is both human and far above anything humans can understand.
- When approaching the Brahman an individual is always “risking their head”.
- The world is a giant chain of devourers and devoured. The only way not to belong to this cycle is by existing *beyond* it, in the realm of the invisible. This other realm, not of this earth but sometimes faintly seen in it, is therefore a space free of violence, free of rising empires and military conquests, free of slaughter and systematic consumption. In both Christianity and Islam, the idea of heaven shares this same quality.
- The relationship between gods and humans is a delicate and diverse topic in the longstanding pool of cultures that is known as Hinduism. The gods are often seen as daily authorities, very much real and present, while other times they are used as in an arguably more allegorical sense, as distant figures that are esoteric, both real and imaginary, symbolic and literal. But one of the underlying ideas in Hinduism is the close relationship between gods and humans: the same way that a god can share the best of human

qualities, humans can actually also aspire to be divine, through profound awareness and knowledge. One can cease to be human by fusing with the wholeness of life, losing some of the main attributes of humanity on the way. This question of going *beyond* humanity is a recurrent topic throughout world history, from the process of conquering those that are inferior, to the utilitarian idea of technical and spiritual progress of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, all the way to Nazism and its idea of the *Übermensch*. But in Hinduism this superiority isn't something to be achieved socially and culturally on a material sense, it is rather a process that happens in the invisibility of the mind and that could be described as *ceasing to care*. *"How can you know that which doesn't allow itself to be known? By actually becoming that yourself."*

- Yajñalvalkya is one of the few firm individual and "normal" personalities that arise from the corpus of Vedic literature. He is a thinker, a philosopher, a lone wise man and the ultimate master of debates. In this sense he is something of a parallel to the future figure of the Buddha, whose great achievement as a historical figure was establishing an influential religion based on a single human individual. Yet before there was him there was Yajñalvalkya, who wasn't said to be related to any historical legend or religious figure. Much like the Buddha, he was just a strong, intelligent, authoritative human figure.
- Sacrifice in the Vedic context is seen as a way to bring awareness to evil. What is exactly evil in this sense? It is the fact that in order to survive human beings have to kill. After murder, the mind is then cleansed through this explicit declaration of guilt, which is sacrifice. It is an acceptance of the state of the world, where food eventually becomes food, where killers eventually get killed. Vedic culture dismisses the notion of history but is, in this sense, quite mindful of humanity's prehistoric period: escaping the food chain and becoming nature's anomaly entails awareness of this special situation and the need to acknowledge guilt. And this guilt came in the first place from the bizarre human decision to become the hunter and not just the hunted, to adapt and *imitate*. Calasso highlight the importance of the act of imitation in this process, through which the natural order of things becomes subverted. And in this subversion, there was also pleasure, the pleasure of conquering animals and dominating them. Interestingly, this take on the

origin of humanity is very closely related to some of the main ideas of the Biblical version of human genesis.

- The unsolvable riddle at the heart of sacrifice: why does awareness lead to murdering an animal?
- The Vedic texts include a wildly different take on the concept of evolution, although the importance of a process of transformation is also essential. As the centuries developed, animals gradually stopped walking on two legs and instead started walking on four, because they were afraid of sacrifice, they couldn't handle slaughter. So, humans kept that initial posture, which is indeed a sign of strength and some form of superiority. In this version of evolution, animals are essentially failures.
- What is identified as nature is only something that arises at the moment of sacrifice, it is this very moment where awareness and action combine. Vedic India once again presents an unheard-of theory: humanity can only be a part of nature from time to time, when it has accomplished what in many other cultures is often considered an artificial deviation from nature. *Humanity starts at less than zero. Human beings and their bodies are just a wound.*
- Sacrifice is never far from people's lives, even as an idea or a heroic concept. It is often taken as the conscious act of damaging oneself for the sake of some greater good. The word has a very different connotation in this understanding, and perhaps it can be seen most clearly in Christianity, where the ultimate sacrifice was Jesus' death and martyrdom. So even if sacrifices as such stopped historically, the idea of a sacrifice was still relevant. The conversation with the invisible was still taking place: the violence became an internal, emotional process because it had already reached its ultimate physical form in the form of a bloody man on a cross. Later on, sacrifice became a word used in wars: a necessary action that brings harm to a person that accepts such damage as unavoidable, for the sake of a greater good. It would also be present in the mass capitalist slaughter of animals, which is often seen as necessary and fair, but also as horrifying and brutal. Sacrifice is constantly present in that sense. But it was also seen in the Nazis' desire to eliminate and *purify* the earth of those they deemed undeserved. Their actions carried a clear *religious*

connotation, an understanding of their part on a much larger moral and historical project that needed violence to be fulfilled. But it also needed the terrifying connotation of personal *belief*. The word 'Holocaust' mirrors this religious mindset, since it was originally meant as a religious action performed by Jews themselves. In order to denominate this new, historically unprecedented act of systematic and successful violence, posterity resorted to a religious term; because only a word with a religious connotation can explain the religious connotations of such actions.

- Who is exactly Prajapati, that mysterious name that appears in some early Vedic texts but then disappears without a trace? He is called the father of the gods; he is referred to as the beginning and the cornerstone. So why is there so much silence surrounding him? Because Prajapati represents the invisible and the unknown. He doesn't have an identity or a clear image because he is a question. He is a representation of the infinite that humanity can only grasp; in a way, he is uncomfortable, and that is why figures like Krishna or Siva are preferred over him. Prajapati is far too ambiguous, yet he is always lurking behind. He is what in Ancient China came to be labeled as the Tao, that which can't really be said, that which rules everything but can't be ruled. He is the idea behind Islam's prohibition of representing God. He is the unsolvable paradox. And because he is overwhelming, he is destined to be left alone, isolated. Prajapati is the mind.
- When western intellectuals started studying Indian culture and philosophy, they often found themselves exasperated by the constant difficult and enigmatic imagery of Ancient India. But why were other forms of mythology received with respect and patience while India's was seen as an obstacle? It was probably because found right next to that mythology were also some of the most logical and subtle human thoughts ever communicated, and the contrast between both seemed like a strange contradiction.
- In the context of Hinduism's understanding of the act of consuming, *Hunger* takes on a particularly profound and violent connotation. It deserves to be described as an actual figure, with capital H.
- The Rishis are some of the most famous and representative figures in all of Indian culture; the images of bearded, adorned men sitting down immersed in thought have become

synonymous with India and its well-known spiritual depth. And seen in the context of the Vedic texts that they came from, they also arise as some of the most complicated: one could say that they are both divine and human, and that is precisely in them that one finds a bridge between those two seemingly opposite terms. In Hinduism these wise men are given a place of importance and influence which parallels that of Krishna or Siva; they aren't seen as their inferiors, which illustrates an interesting and sophisticated fact about Indian culture: humanity wasn't understood as being completely ruled and controlled by the divine. At times certain individuals were as important as a God, and in a way, they were *beyond* human, which is mirrored in the social and political division of India: some human beings are simply above, and this is only natural. Because the Rishis were in awareness of the nature of the mind, they were seen as superior, sometimes even superior to the Gods, given that it is suggested that the Gods are only the result of the mind.

- The Rishis understood traveling as something that can only happen in the mind. That is the only real journey. Hence their lack of movement. They remain 'vigilant', much like the divine, whose true occupation is to observe. What the Rishis did was considered as the only thing that the mind can actually achieve, which is to say, establishing connections between phenomena. Humanity isn't supposed to do more than that, because humanity simply can't do more than that. There is a healthy relief in this declaration of impotence.
- When one is alive it means that something is *burning*. That is the Hindu precept. When the Buddha came along, he emphasized the importance of Nirvana, *extinction*. As in *extinguishing a fire*: ceasing the *tapas*.
- When Hindu texts narrate battles and major events, the narrative never focuses exclusively on warriors and kings, it also makes a lot of room for Rishis and gods, as if it was understood that every real battle is actually taking place between them, in the realms of the mind.
- "The mind is similar to the gods and also superior to them."
- "There is no exist from the mind. It was always there. Before anything happened, the mind was already there."

- Vedic culture is clear about one point: there is no contest between Mind and Word. There is no real balance. The Mind is far more powerful, “far more unlimited”. According to the Rishis, thinking and linguistics aren’t equivalent. Linguistics can be a symptom of the act of thinking; but it is absolutely clear that consciousness came before anything else. The relationship, explained through a violent conflict in mythology, is one of hostility. It is meant to be complicated.
- “The Mind truly is more than the Word”, a quote that sums up the deep divide between East and West. Never in its history has India renounced to this axiom, never has its culture tried to establish something more powerful than the infinite depth of the mind, not even what was deemed to be the most superior and refined of all languages, Sanskrit. Vedic texts often use the word “*iva*”, which could be translated as “so to speak” or “in a certain way”, a fact that underlines the constant relevance of approximation in using a language. The precision that is desired is in the mind of each individual, not in the language, and even then, it is only a suggestion of that which is deeper than human thought, that which can be known only “in a certain sense.”
- In Vedic culture there is always the suggestion of a dual perception inside the vision of a single individual; one is never quite alone, because there is always an eye watching an eye, the awareness that one is aware. Not being able to acknowledge this results in the illusion of ‘oneness’ or of ‘unity’, which is inaccurate. This is what the Upanishads refer to as the Atman, that other *being* inside each individual, the connection to the infinite of the mind. It isn’t to be accepted or dismissed, it can only be experienced in the individual life of each person. The poetic symbol of this duality became the human eyelid, which is the only place in which a human being can see himself reflected and “duplicated”.
- The perception of the hidden “duality” is the ultimate objective to achieve, the “most difficult and most effective of all conquests.” From this point of view, Western philosophy never even focused on the most important of all accurate observations and was just “fooled by the illusion of oneness”.
- This duality is certainly some sort of contradiction according to the most intuitive logic, and the fact that this duality is nevertheless true gives a very specific connotation to the

concept of *contradiction*: it becomes something to explore and to embrace, not to be dismissed as a mistake. Ancient Indian culture was based on this immensely complicated and sophisticated idea, which has never disappeared through its history. The logic of contradiction has remained at the center of its culture, whereas in different civilizations, most notably Western civilization, it has only become more widespread through the latest developments in science and physics. Oppenheimer was famously interested in the Bhagavad Gita and even learned how to read Sanskrit in order to become better acquainted with the Vedic texts; in order to develop the atomic bomb, he had to follow an axiom that seemed opposite to scientific thought and its righteous practice: “in theory it doesn’t work, but in practice it does.” *Contradiction worked in practice.*

- Paradoxes seemed to attract the Aryans immensely. They recognized in them the very essence of “enigmas”, of life in general, not as a problem to be solved but rather as a challenge to ponder.
- The Upanishads are all about “deconstructing the mind and then building it back again”. According to Calasso, this has never been done with such precision anywhere else.
- Most of what exists is “hidden” and remains “unmanifested”, hence the need to “negate” the world. It is, after all, only a small portion of what there is, and one in which the divine is often hidden.
- The relationship between the Buddha and Hinduism is a delicate and complicated matter and it is difficult to describe accurately; this probably has to do with the lack of thought given to the historical and material in Ancient India. What was borrowed or what originated where probably wasn’t nearly as important as the actual individual practice. Everything else was secondary. Yet both systems of thought (a useful albeit superficial term) share the idea of an awakening and a negation of life, and at times a dismissal of the notion of ‘gods’.
- By waking up an individual ceases to establish a clear difference between himself and the divine. This means entering into the Brahman, the wholeness of the universe. And this is achieved not by good deeds or thoughts, or by being saintly. It’s all just a matter of awareness; everything else isn’t *necessary*.

- The complex imagery of mythology isn't meant to be taken as mere imagery. It's quite real, without being necessary literal. This is the meaning of the *esoteric*, a version of human thought that is always present in one way or the other. The question of whether it is literal or possible isn't truly relevant.
- One powerful idea in the Vedic texts: to realize just how weak human beings are, one only has to look at their need to sleep. Not only are we not immortal, but we are subjected to have to "die" every day because otherwise we are simply not strong enough to live on. "You aren't even capable of not sleeping."
- To produce tapas, the necessary internal *burning*, one doesn't even have to cross his legs or move to a remote location. As long as the mind is working how it should, everything else isn't *necessary*.
- The Brahmanas are the most overlooked and ignored of all the texts amongst the Vedic canon. The Rig Veda can be instantly understood as a poetic text, and the Upanishads can also be read as a poetic work, but one where poetry serves to explain a metaphysical or philosophical concept. There are various references throughout civilizations that could be used when approaching these or epics like the Mahabharata or the Ramayana. Yet the Brahmanas are the obsessive and exceedingly meticulous instructions for the appropriate behavior during sacrifice; in this sense they are far too specific to be explored easily. They aren't philosophic, nor are they poetic. They are instructional and also very obscure, because every instruction is dissected and explained through the language of ancient ritual. Thus, they have often been ignored in academic fields, even openly harassed. The Brahmanas are by their very nature exhaustive, and they were never meant to be easy to approach since they are detailing the most important and profound of all human activities, sacrifice. But Calasso rewards them with an interesting gift, naming them the beginning of *prose* literature, given their aim to describe everything and be as *literal* as possible. In a sense, they are actually genuinely realistic in tone and purpose. He even goes on to compare them to Proust and his *Recherche*, where *the "ritual" is the author's life and his past emotions and actions*, which are now being obsessively scrutinized in search of deeper meaning and hidden connections given that the author himself has accepted

awareness and thinking as the ultimate aim of life. In both the Brahmanas and Proust, every physical act is shown to have a connection to every mental act, a deeper layer of meaning that is worth exploring. Everything in the Vedic texts is by definition religious, there simply can't be another understanding of humanity. It is interesting to see that, in a way, this could also be extended to Proust and his acceptance of the 'wholeness' of life and its infinity.

- Before the mid-20th century, Western academic circles thought of the Brahmanas as uncomfortable and problematic texts that stood out as 'unworthy' in the Vedic canon. When it was finally accepted as part of a larger corpus of unparalleled deep thought and enviable complexity, it was as if "a handful of allegedly insane patients had suddenly become members of an academic circle". Calasso argues that perhaps the Brahmanas could teach anthropologists about their field, and not the other way around.
- In Vedic rituals there is a connection between the powerful sacredness of sacrifice and the image of a woman: the altar is supposed to look "attractive as a beautiful woman". This idea could also be seen as a challenge to the opposition between gods and humanity, because female beauty, a woman's beauty, is suggested as a phenomenon powerful enough to overpower them both. This is also mirrored in how the plots of both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are driven by the relevance of a woman, as is the Iliad. Or by how it is said that the one thing the almighty, essentially divine Rishis couldn't be sure of was the "faithfulness of their women". The constant, powerful presence of the feminine is always shown as a major force that proves hugely influential.
- Calasso poetically compares the vigilance of the Rishis to the narrator's plight in Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, where the story shows the infinite depth and diversity of the human mind. In both cases life is a journey through awareness and observation, much like Proust and his *Recherche*. But in Celine there is an intense and desperate longing to *escape*, which perhaps brings it closer to the Vedic ideal of "leaving this insufficient world behind".
- When Socrates was about to die, it is said he spent his last energies on exploring the world of the mythological, unlike the rest of his life where he had focused on what he considered

its opposite, the logical. Near death he became interested in enigmas and mysteries, and his thoughts turned to the gods. It was at that moment that Greek philosophy was closest to Vedic thought: the wisest man in the Greek world had suddenly discovered, just for a little while, the most basic of all Vedic precepts, the unavoidable relevance of mystery.

- All of Hinduism, and later on Buddhism, would develop around the idea of a residue, the result of the unavoidable insufficiency of sacrifice. In human action there is always *something* left behind, margin of error where something doesn't quite enter the proposed action or theory. Sacrifice is meant to be *everything*, but this will never happen. Yet this insufficiency is understood as natural, as a part of the world order. The residue doesn't happen exclusively in human activity, it's part of life as a whole. This enigmatic idea is explained by one of the most important, yet also perhaps one of the most complex of all the sentences in the book: *sacrifice is always taking place*. It can't be avoided or escaped. And it is not exclusively a human affair.
- The figure of the *renouncer*, famously synonymous with Indian culture, isn't present in the early Vedic texts. He only shows up gradually, eventually culminating in the figure of the ultimate renouncer, Buddha. Much like the Rishis, the figure of the renouncer suggests that everything can be taken to the private, silent and unreachable sphere of the mind. Everything happens inside the individual, who can now be isolated from culture and society, and even from sacrifice. This is a major deviation from previous Vedic proceedings, where even the Rishis were supposed to be part of a larger organism. This figure of the individual that renounces is perhaps just the logic extension of the doctrine of the Atman: if the whole world is inside one person, then why wouldn't it be accurate to simply explore that inner world in the silence of the mind? Calasso links this figure to the Western archetypes of artists and intellectuals, immersed in a relationship with their inner impulses and desires, *somewhat aware of a larger depth found in themselves which is searched by the burning of the tapas*.
- While early 20th century French anthropologists were studying the Māori, they came across the Tiki, a small jade figurine often worn by women, which was meant to symbolize the wholeness of the universe, much like the word Brahman in Hinduism. Marcel Mauss

identified the enormous significance of such a cultural artefact: an apparently simple figure actually *symbolized* something infinite and unbelievably profound. This meant that there was a profound well of depth and sophistication in a seemingly 'primitive' and 'simple' culture like the Māori, but it was a depth that had to be understood as symbolic, as being a representation of a state of mind. Mauss found more accuracy and spiritual depth in their culture and tradition than in some Ancient Greek texts, which he thought were less coherent and sophisticated. This observation on his part is a huge historical watershed moment: a Western intellectual had denied the notion of Western superiority, and he did so based on the existence of a small figure worn around a woman's neck.

The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony:

- Calasso repeats the question throughout the book: "How did it all begin?" The text is essentially a poetic meditation on the undying and unavoidable relevance of myths in the development of world history. Specifically, in this case it is the relevance of the Greek legacy on the creation of Europe. Despite their perennial obscurity and incompleteness, Greek mythology is one of the cornerstones, if not *the* cornerstone, of European civilization and its later evolution. Therefore, behind this 'civilized' and 'logical' conception of humanity there is an inevitable past of mysticism and symbolic poetry, arguably devoid of scientific rationality. Myths are older stories constantly intermingling with new stories, in a process of transformation that can't be avoided. It's an endless cycle of variation, the same way that history is a cycle of shifting narratives.
- Europa was sleeping and had a dream where she was caught between two women: Asia, and another one she wasn't able to name. In this allegory we find a representation of the sense of the 'other', geographically and culturally distant from what is found in the immediate present. Asia and Europe would be caught in an eternal conflict of tradition,

dominion and underlying symbolic narrative: “The war between Europe and Asia has never ceased.” This war has fed a timeless sense of ‘Europeanness’.

- Calasso, as do all modern archeologists and historians, points to Crete as one of the cradles of European thought and civilization; but he also states the lack of evidence to support such a huge claim. This ambition is challenged by Crete having “something childish about it, something elusive”. Yet, he also affirms that in Crete there was an openness and willingness to talk about what in other cultures was “unnamable”. Thus ‘discussion’ and ‘conversation’ come across as major elements of distinction.
- The Linear B tablets feature the oldest known form of written Greek. In it we find many names of famous and recognizable Greek deities that would eventually become part of a continent’s collective unconscious. But in the broken fragments of the tablets there was a considerable number of additional names that have been forever lost. The Olympian Gods carried down by posterity are therefore little more than a remnant of what the pantheon used to be.
- Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is usually considered something like the basic collection of Greek myths, collected and standardized for posterity during the times of Ancient Rome. In its very title we see an explicit description of the nature of myths: a succession of transformations, in constant state of change. A series of unending metamorphoses. And although the stories’ change would be, in a way, irreversible, the ambitious memory of what they used to be can’t ever leave the understanding of what they are now. World history, in a sense, is guided by the succession of *copies* set in motion in order to replicate a powerful original. But despite the imitative nature of these copies there is always a new meaning, there is always *something new*.
- Contradiction bears no weight in the creation of a web of myths and their variations. There is no narrative to follow, nor a set of specific and set values to present or define. The same character lives many lives and dies many deaths. Perhaps in mythology nothing is incompatible, because its core usefulness overwhelms structure and narrative.
- Calasso states there are three main stages of historical relationship between humanity and divinity. Conviviality, rape and, most recently, indifference. The titular marriage of

Cadmus and Harmony is an example of a distant time when the Gods would willingly spend time with humanity. The roles of each part in this balance were more than clear, and that is the reason why conviviality was simple. But as time went on, humanity started *ignoring* the divine. And the Gods' answer was to possess and dominate humanity as literally as it could, through the violence of rape. This strong symbolic image served as a reminder that, despite humanity's focus on humanity and its mortal life, the divine remains unavoidable and magnanimous.

- The images of Olympian gods were “the first time” a group of divinities were represented as humanoid beings instead of a group of supernatural figures. This is profoundly significant since it indicated something of a symbolic bridge between humanity and divinity, a suggestion that perhaps both were hopelessly interconnected and both were part of each other. This way there'd be something divine about humanity and something human about divinity. This is clearly seen in the Gods of Homer, who not only seem human in their responses and ambitions, but actually come across as representations of some of the lowest attributes of humanity. Greek Gods were, in a word, uniquely fragile and vulnerable, vulgar even. Zeus' only interest was going to bed with women, mortal and immortal alike. And this can also be seen in the Trojan War, a story filled with drama, excitement and constant competitive tension; divinity preferred this entertaining method of dominion and control instead of a clearer and faster method of extermination.
- Calasso describes the Olympian Gods as the first divinities “who wished to be perfect rather than powerful.” Greek civilization comes across as the first people who attempted to rely on the “aesthetic rather than on the divine”.
- The idea of the hero entails a deep transformation in Greek mythology and its psyche. The concept of the hero suggests an interest for that which isn't, strictly speaking, *necessary*. It represents a step towards risk and art, a metaphysical dare. Interestingly enough, Achilles is never shown to envy, or even particularly worship, an idea of divinity. His idealized example of grandeur is instead a glorious past filled with courageous and capable warriors, human warriors.

- Calasso devotes many pages to the idea of love in the Greek mindset, which he claims (if I understand it correctly) is inextricably linked with homosexuality and dominion. Eroticism is violent by nature, because dominion and sexuality are intimately connected. Once the stage of Athenian philosophy reaches Greek history, it is suggested that this connection becomes an intellectual violence, which nevertheless still attempts a dominion. Thought therefore comes from an essentially erotic human impulse. That of conquest. This would explain the relevance that homosexuality has in the cultural world of Ancient Greece, especially if we consider how it occurs between an older, more powerful man and a younger, more vulnerable youth. The logic of violence and dominion dictates social relationships, and with it we also find an affirmation of a certain idea of masculinity. These pages are quite interesting, but I find them particularly obscure and difficult to navigate. What seems very attractive to me is the idea that thought and intellect are essentially resources meant for violence. And what also strikes me is that I don't see how this underlying interest in dominion, by any means necessary, could be specific to Greek culture.
- Calasso writes about the "finest of wars, which is the war of love". And this love alludes almost exclusively to homosexual love between the lover and his younger beloved. At the same time, the role of women is one of unmistakable inferiority that borders on repugnance: as symbols for passivity, they are to be feared, unlike young boys who will eventually grow up and become actively dominant themselves. A woman is taken to represent the exact opposite of all the values that Greek society understands as essential, meaning those of male dominance. Women represented a great unknown where those established values weren't so easily comprehended since they seemed to possess "their own indecipherable erotic self-sufficiency", terrifying and mysterious. The historical 'female' is therefore covered in silence. Since the erotic role of young boys was much clearly defined, it was apparently often the preferred sexual activity. And this relevance can be seen in the morality attached to the act, where the discussion of 'virtue' is frequent: by possessing the beloved, the lover himself is truly "full of God", he who once was himself a young beloved.

- In Homer there is an underlying interest in the idea of perfection. The stories spare no time in explaining anything, not the beginning of the narrative nor an explanation of its main figures and their desires. This is what Calasso calls 'perfection' because Homer narrates as if everything was strong enough to stand on its own. It is sufficient unto itself, like the might of Achilles or the epic, almost apocalyptic scope of the Trojan War. The culture of Ancient Greece would be founded on these 'perfect' stories, performing the role of a sacred text to turn to for helpful consultation.
- The Homeric heroes represent a group of highly powerful and rare humans who are possessed with a non-human divine might. Their greatness is explicitly explained as an otherworldly contribution coming from up above. There is an important idea in this, seen throughout world history and in different sacred texts: everything that is grand about humanity is influenced by a force that isn't human. Individuals are, at best, vessels of something far more powerful and far more mysterious. But this is also paralleled in how Homer treats divinity: the Gods themselves are also victims of stronger forces that overpower them and force them to act a certain way. The intimate relationship between humanity and divinity is stressed out through this profound similarity. And the best example is Achilles, who is power, emotion, intensity and facility made human.
- Achilles is a king without a kingdom, because he doesn't need a kingdom to explain or represent his greatness. It is absolutely evident. The figure would go on to become an archetype in the collective unconscious: he is the prime example of a real *individual*, one that can't be paralleled by anyone around him, one that is completely self-sufficient and unique. The very best of the best and the end result of all possible high idealizations. Achilles is profoundly human but also, in a way, superhuman, above the rest of humanity; he understands the subtlety of the human condition: that in its fragility and its temporary nature there is also an evident glory.
- The exemplary masculinity of Achilles is mirrored in the exemplary femininity of Helen, whose beauty is said to be unparalleled on Earth, to the point where even the Gods have to be involved in her splendor. And the same way that the hero represents the masculine ideal of active dominance, she represents the feminine ideal of passive silence.

- Beauty is one of the most important concepts in the story of the Trojan War, which only goes to show the complicated and intense relationship that humankind has with it. It is shown as something otherworldly powerful and influential, something to be coveted but also feared due to its possible consequences.
- Calasso claims that “every notion of progress is refuted by the existence of the Iliad”. In his view, this first achievement by the first of all mature European civilizations could never be bettered. The Iliad is time itself, expressed through desperate necessity and through the raw emotions of human existence. There is a crisp clearness to Homer’s style, precisely because its focus is on that which is literal and already present. All the possible essentials are already there. What comes before and after is not relevant. This is why the works have always carried such strength: by focusing on the most basic of all phenomena, time, they are able to express that which is most crude and important.
- A myth is never a unique phenomenon. It is related to countless stories on every direction. Even if sometimes the myth we learn about seems to cast no shadow on any other story, there is always a possible further link to be traced in our mind.
- The Greek word *telos* could be translated as both ‘perfection’ and ‘death’, which is a direct way of saying that in the Ancient Greek mind there *is* no such as happiness in this world. There is rather struggle and suffering, as exemplified by the profoundly humane and violent texts of Homer.
- Calasso suggests that our relationship to Ancient Greece is in fact very little more than a “Greek Question”, a continuous process of wondering that is destined to be incomplete, even when it *is* meaningful, enriching and a cornerstone of world history. The past and its culture can’t help but be a question. But nevertheless, the act of questioning eventually digs out an important truth: there is nothing new, everything is an act of *remembrance*. What this means, the way I understand it, is that the human spectrum is infinite in its expression of different ideas, but that despite cultural and historical differences, it is always a process of humanity investigating humanity. The worried troubles of an era have already been a source of anxiety for previous ones, as they will continue to be for future ones. This is mirrored in how myths are always suffused with new life through time and

interpretation: they are recognizably similar, but also evidently different. Such a phenomenon also happens with the study of history: events are seen in a certain way and then reevaluated according to different and new needs, which only shows their lack of inherent and stable meaning.

- The uniqueness of Ancient Greece lies in its rare historical attempt at self-sufficiency, separate from the realms of supernatural divinity or sacrifice. This can be symbolized by the pride that Athens inspired in its inhabitants and in its culture rooted in discussion and dialogue. Further symptoms of such an attempt can be seen in the socio-political irrelevance of priestly classes and on the semi-religious authority of dramatic texts. But in Ancient Greece it was difficult to establish a real and universal authority: all mythological variations were valid, all of them were important. And it was understood that variations were also unavoidable.
- Like the Bharata War in Hindu culture, the Trojan War represents a turning point in world history and the metaphysical history of humanity. It is the end of an era, the era of heroes and their divine greatness. Odysseus marks the end of this era because he represents a radically different type of hero: his role isn't that of glorious slayer, but rather of an intellectual adventurer who uses his intelligence to overcome the obstacles he finds on his journey back home. The idea of the hero is transformed into a figure that pays attention to the subtle details of the mundane; sheer violence and a superior force aren't as vital anymore. Odysseus' power lies in his domineering understanding. And parallel to this symbolic duality of Achilles/Odysseus is the step from the ambiguity of the myth to the rational process of the *logos*, one of Ancient Greece's most important features. The figure of Achilles requires an evocation on our part, as a mountaintop we might hopefully reach. Odysseus, on the other hand, is already a familiar and "invisible companion."
- The phenomenon of the mythology of the Greek world is intimately linked with the historical phenomenon of philosophy's birth. The same civilization occupies a span of time stretching from religious belief, on to religious doubt and human-like deities, on to a focus on human intellect instead of divine wisdom. In Ancient Greece we find the archetype of the omnipotent divinity in Zeus and the archetype of the hero in Achilles, but we also find

the archetype of the philosopher in Plato and, later on, Aristotle, as well as the archetype of an ideal political system, democracy. It is certainly significant that all these contrasts were laid out by the same civilization, and perhaps this is why the Greeks would go on to become such an unstoppable cultural force through history: there is an obvious intensity to their endeavor that feels overpowering and impossible to ignore, even when it seemed to advocate for very different lifestyles and ideologies throughout its history.

- The characters in Homer's stories feel constantly challenged and limited by their own nature. It seems fitting that a culture based around the images and lessons of such stories would be interested in explicitly searching for their own limits, often in the privacy of their own minds.
- The riddle of the Sphinx is one of the most famous chapters to have come out of Greek civilization. At its core lies the contradictory irony that makes up the human condition: the answer to the question of what is humanity is a declaration of the subjectivity attached to such an inquiry. But it also clearly demonstrates how this subjectivity is objective: humanity sometimes is one way and sometimes another. It can't help but be mutable and elusive by nature, which affirms the insurmountable relevance of change and time in all human affairs. Oedipus solves the riddle by giving the correct answer, but afterwards he becomes a question himself. And thousands of years later Sigmund Freud tackles that question with his own personal subjectivity, only to become himself another question that has been posed rhetorically.